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Best Practices for Promoting Teachers' Professional Development in Malaysia

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Abstract

Cluster schools in Malaysia were formed to employ best teachers to achieve educational outcomes corresponding to the 4th industrial revolution (IR). This study examines the best practices of promoting teachers' professional development prevalent among principals of cluster secondary schools in Malaysia. The Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) was used as the data collection instrument. A diverse sample of 871 respondents belonging to both genders, different ethnicities and types of schools, and having various designations at schools was drawn randomly using cluster sampling. The researcher employed descriptive statistical procedures involving frequency count and percentage distribution as the means to analyze the collected data. The use of such data is a standard practice in Malaysia which is employed to plan professional development among principals of cluster secondary schools. The study indicated that the best practice of developing teacher professionalism among principals of cluster secondary schools in Malaysia according to principals' and teachers' perceptions was 'setting aside time at faculty meetings for teachers to share ideas about instruction or information from in-service activities.' The findings will effectively assist the process of promoting a positive school learning climate among the principals and teachers of secondary schools in Malaysia in the wake of meeting the goals of National Philosophy of Education, Vision 2020 and the aspirations of the Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013-2025 in the era of IR 4. Other school principals may use the outcomes of this research to facilitate and improve students' academic performance in their respective schools and join hands in the collective effort of raising the work force capable of meeting national goals at par with international standards.

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Introduction

The Ministry of Education (MOE), Malaysia announced the implementation of cluster secondary schools and the aim was to develop and produce excellent students meeting learning outcomes stated in the Education Blueprint 2013-2025 of Malaysian National Curriculum. Every school is a collection of performing and non-performing students; however, in specially designated cluster schools the principals are fully empowered to enhance student achievement using effective instructional leadership practices (Day, Gu, & Sammons, [2016](#)). MOE affirmed that the purpose of higher secondary education in Malaysia is to enable the Malaysian society to gain command on the knowledge, skills, and values which are vital for sustainable development in the cut throat competition instigated by the 4th IR. The mission of the cluster school system is to achieve these national objectives by developing and producing excellent graduates who are internationally competitive and accepted in internationally acclaimed institutions of higher education across the globe to pursue higher studies.

1.1 Education development plan Malaysia 2013-2025

The prioritization is driven both by the system's starting point as well as international evidence about the factors that make the most difference in improving student outcomes. Given the need to build the system's capacity and capability successively, MOE has sequenced the transformation to occur in three waves.

1.1.1 Wave 1 (2013-2015): turn around the system by supporting teachers and focusing on core skills. By the end of Wave 1, MOE will ensure that all teachers, principals, and schools achieve a minimum standard.

1.1.2 Wave 2 (2016-2020): accelerate system improvement. During the second wave, MOE will roll out structural changes aimed at accelerating the pace of change (planning for all these initiatives will likely begin during Wave 1).

1.1.3 Wave 3 (2021-2025): move towards excellence with increased operational flexibility. By the start of the third wave, all schools, teachers, and principals should be performing well above the minimum standard. Hence, it is worthwhile to study the practices used for promoting teachers' professional development among the principals of cluster secondary schools for the realization of Education Blueprint 2013-2025, Malaysia in the era of IR 4.0 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, [2012](#)).

2. Literature Review

This section discusses the literature related to the role of principal in promoting professional development of instructional leadership formulated, modified and adapted by Hallinger and Murphy and their associates.

2.1 Role of Principal

The studies of the principal's role in the 1970s were more concerned with the principal's role in supervising and administering the school (Southworth, [2002](#)). In the 1990s and 2000s, the studies became more focused on the principal's role as school administrator and instructional leader (Hallinger, Wang, Chen, & Liare, [2015](#); Harris, Jones, Cheah, Devadason, & Adams, [2017](#)); transformational leader (Day et al., [2016](#); Salleh & Saidova, [2013](#)), strategic leader (Hairuddin, [2016](#); Ryan, [2016](#)) and exemplary leader (Salleh & Khalid, [2018](#)).

These days, the role of principal is getting more complex because it is always linked with change. According to Fullan ([2016](#)), the principal's role is critical because the implementation of change is a slow and laborious task. In this situation, the principal is required to be a professional leader who takes appropriate action. Salleh and Hatta ([2018](#)) stated that an effective leader is always visible in school surroundings, focuses on the teaching and learning processes, monitors classrooms and gives feedback. The principal should provide a positive learning environment for excellent academic achievement as well as balanced and holistic personality development and should also pave the way for a harmonious and well-adjusted society as stipulated in the National Philosophy of Education, Malaysia.

McCarley, Peters and Decman ([2016](#)) perceived that the future role of the principal will be to encourage collaboration and teamwork among

teachers according to the norms of instructional leadership. This, however, will require the active participation of school principals to facilitate change by motivating their staff and students, by reaching out to the community, and by indulging in continuous improvement of their schools. The assumption inherent here is that effective leaders manage and lead and more importantly, indulge in capacity building and professional development to prepare future educational leadership to meet national needs (Salleh, [2014](#), [2017](#)). Thus, there are many researchers who found and documented the functions of instructional, strategic and transformational leadership in order to improve the quality of education within schools and to enhance student achievement and teachers' professional development for maximum commitment and excellent performance (Hallinger et al., [2015](#); Day et al., [2016](#); Haris et al., 2017).

2.2 Promoting Teachers' Professional Development

According to Fullan, Quinn, and McEachen ([2017](#)), to ensure deeper learning by encouraging problem-solving and critical thinking skills and to develop and nurture highly motivated and engaged learners requires mobilizing the energy and capacities of teachers to the maximum. Following the guidelines recommended by Fullan and his associates, Salleh ([2017](#)) suggested that school leaders in Malaysia need to fundamentally transform the learning culture of schools and the teaching profession itself.

Following Southworth ([2002](#)), Hairuddin ([2016](#)) stated that principals have several ways of supporting teachers' efforts to improve instruction. They can inform teachers of opportunities for staff development and lead in-service teacher training activities. They can ensure that staff development activities are closely linked to school goals and can also ensure that teacher participation is either school wide or encompasses a specific tier of education, such as primary, elementary or secondary education. This function also involves helping teachers to integrate skills learned during staff development programs and assisting them in their classroom implementation (Ahamad & Kasim, [2016](#)).

Promoting teachers' professional development is the most influential type of instructional leadership behavior at both the elementary and high school levels. Supporting this statement, O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw and

Eklund (2015) noted that in order to be a successful instructional leader, the principal must give primary attention to the planning of the professional development programs for his / her staff; special emphasis should be put upon specific leadership techniques and procedures needed for teachers' capacity building and for overall improvement in teachers' performance. The principal's role in this regard includes classroom visits, observation, arranging in-service educational programs, conferences, seminars and workshops, introducing the membership of professional associations, etc.

The principal is expected to provide the appropriate leadership which will assist each staff member to make the maximum contribution in the school's effort to provide quality and up-to-date education (Hoy & Hoy, 2006; Salleh & Hatta, 2010). S/he is expected to have experience in this area because, according to Hairuddin (2016), knowledge about teaching and learning and the ability to share these insights with teachers is a key factor in the selection process of any good principal.

Tajasom and Ariffin (2011) stated that leaders in successful schools are more concerned and focused on teachers' professional development and teaching strategies employed to address areas in which student achievement is lacking. Thus, Bear, Yang and Pasipanodya (2015) emphasized three conditions for principals to help flourish site-based professional development over time including 1) the need for a strong principal or a strong superintendent who supports the principal; 2) the need to focus on the end result, that is, improvement in student learning; and 3) the need to maintain focus over time.

Professional development for teachers should be based on a framework of research-based instructional strategies (Danielson, Doolittle, & Bradley, 2007). These skills help teachers to bridge theory and practice and create high quality learning environment in their classrooms. Hairuddin (2016) suggested that these strategies fall into three categories namely organization, instruction, and assessment. Organizing strategies include planning, lesson design, time use (time management, time on task, and pacing), advanced work, and classroom management. Instructional strategies exist on a continuum from most teacher-centered to most student-centered and include lecture, demonstration, questioning, discussion, guided practice, independent practice, grouping, role play, simulation, and

reflective inquiry. Finally, assessment strategies cover student assessment and self-assessment.

According to Wright, Wilson, Gordon and Stallworth (2002), through site-based professional development programs teachers will obtain i) fresh teaching ideas and management strategies; ii) samples of successful lesson plans and the time needed to practice them; iii) time to share resources and personal stories (for validation and rejuvenation); iv) time to read useful material on issues that directly affect their teaching and learning, such as multiculturalism; v) time to reflect; and vi) opportunities to reinvent themselves. Blasé and Blasé (2000) noted that through professional development, teachers can learn to expand their powers in the classroom in order to 1) analyze practice – both their own and other teachers'; 2) get the exposure to alternatives; and 3) acquire the judgment to know when to employ which method. Those who have taken part in professional development are more likely to include interdisciplinary problems and assessments than their counterparts who have not (Allen, Grigsby & Peters, 2015; Drury, 2018).

Pursuant to the above, Hairuddin (2016) suggested that strategic leaders have to think beyond the present in order to meet the vision and achieve the future missions of school improvement. In other words, the principals should have a strategic plan to promote and develop teachers' professionalism and to equip them with significant knowledge, effective communication skills, exemplary behavior, high motivation, and appropriate decision-making with high accountability and integrity in their job commitment. One formal professional development experience regarding the use of technology is reported to increase the use of computers and other gadgets; similarly, a training workshop on assessment may lead to making portfolios (Castillo, March, Tan, Stockslager, Brundage, Mccullough, & Sabnis, 2018). These include moving all 410,000 teachers and 10,000 principals onto a new career package, restructuring the federal, state, and district offices to align with the revised roles laid out in Wave 1, and introducing a new secondary and a revised primary curriculum that together address concerns about the knowledge, skills, and values needed to thrive in today's global economy.

2.1.1 Wave 3 (2021-2025): move toward excellence with increased operational flexibility. By the start of the third wave, all schools, teachers, and principals should be performing well above the minimum standard. As such, MOE will focus on increasing the operational flexibility to cultivate a peer-led culture of professional excellence. It will also move most, if not all schools, onto a school-based management model and will scale up successful models of instructional innovation. The goal is to create a self-sustaining system that is capable of innovating and taking achievements to greater heights.

Every education system must be anchored into a set of aspirations that are closely tied to its particular national context. Although there are many different perspectives on what will make Malaysia's education system great, almost all stakeholders agree that Malaysia's education system must do much better if it is to live up to the ambitions of all Malaysians. All teachers should have the opportunity to attain an excellent education that is both uniquely Malaysian and remains comparable to the best international systems.

3. Research Questions

The study seeks answers to the following research questions.

1. What are the best practices of promoting teachers' professional development prevalent among the principals of cluster secondary schools of Malaysia according to principals' and teachers' perceptions?
2. What is the level of implementation of promoting teachers' professional development among the principals of cluster secondary schools of Malaysia according to principals' and teachers' perceptions?
3. What is the significance of the best practices used for developing teachers' professionalism among the principals of cluster secondary schools for the realization of Education Blueprint 2013-2025, Malaysia in the era of IR 4.0?

4. Research Methodology

The study was based on the quantitative paradigm and a survey was designed for data collection. The Principal Instructional Management

Rating Scale (PIMRS) developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1987) and modified by others (Latip, 2006; Hatta, 2010) was used as the data collection instrument. Prior permission to conduct this study was obtained from the EPRD – Education, Planning, and Research Division of the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. Cluster sampling was used to collect data; four cluster secondary schools participated in this study and each one was treated as an independent cluster. These were National Secondary School (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan – SMK), National Religious Secondary School (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama – SMKA), Integrated Boarding School (Sekolah Berasrama Penuh Integrasi – SBPI), and Full Boarding School (Sekolah Menengah Berasrama Penuh). All teachers were invited to participate according to their own willingness and everyone was assured of the privacy of the information collected.

4.1 Scale of Practice and Implementation

In this study, the practice of promoting teachers' professional development by principals of cluster secondary schools of Malaysia was categorized into five levels based on the mean scores. Mean = 0.00 – 0.99 was categorized as 'Very Low', Mean = 1.00 – 1.99 was categorized as 'Low', Mean 2.00 – 2.99 was categorized as 'Simple High', Mean 3.00 – 3.99 was categorized as 'High', and Mean = 4.00 – 5.00 was categorized as 'Very High'. These categories correspond with the categories of responses classifying Mean = 0 – 0.99 as 'Never', Mean = 1.00 – 1.99 as 'Seldom', Mean = 2.00 – 2.99 as 'Sometimes', Mean = 3.00 – 3.99 as 'Frequent', and Mean = 4.00 – 5.00 as 'Always'.

5. Results and Analysis

The findings of the current research are elaborated below.

5.1 Best Practices of Promoting Teachers' Professional Development among Principals

Table 1 displays in detail the frequency and percentage of responses for each task involved in the practice of promoting teachers' professional development among principals of cluster secondary schools of Malaysia according to principals' and teachers' perceptions.

Table 1

The Practices of Promoting Teachers' Professional Development among Principals of Cluster Secondary Schools of Malaysia According to Principals' and Teachers' Perceptions (N = 871)

| No. | Items | Frequency/ Percentage | | | | |
|-----|--|-----------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | | N | S | R | F | A |
| 1. | Informs teachers of opportunities for professional development | 22 (2.5) | 108 (12.4) | 214 (24.6) | 333 (38.2) | 194 (22.3) |
| 2. | Selects in-service activities that are consistent with the school's academic goals | 8 (0.9) | 32 (3.7) | 208 (23.9) | 336 (38.6) | 287 (33.0) |
| 3. | Supports teachers' requests for in-service training that is directly related to the school's academic goals | 9 (1.0) | 57 (6.5) | 174 (20.0) | 354 (40.6) | 277 (31.8) |
| 4. | Distributes journal articles to teachers on a regular basis | 41 (4.7) | 181 (20.8) | 232 (26.6) | 272 (31.2) | 145 (16.6) |
| 5. | Actively supports the use of skills acquired during in-service training in the classroom | 7 (0.8) | 54 (6.2) | 225 (25.8) | 328 (37.7) | 257 (29.5) |
| 6. | Ensures that instructional aides receive appropriate training to help students meet instructional objectives | 24 (2.8) | 89 (10.2) | 289 (33.2) | 279 (32.0) | 190 (21.8) |
| 7. | Arranges for outside speakers to make presentations about instruction at faculty meetings | 7 (0.8) | 52 (6.0) | 236 (27.1) | 282 (32.4) | 294 (33.8) |
| 8. | Provides time to meet individually with teachers | 9 (1.0) | 119 (13.7) | 240 (27.6) | 300 (34.4) | 203 (23.3) |

| | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| | to discuss instructional issues | | | | | |
| 9. | Sits in on teachers' in-service activities concerned with instruction | 12 (1.4) | 42 (4.8) | 232 (26.6) | 358 (41.1) | 227 (26.1) |
| 10. | Sets aside time at faculty meetings for teachers to share ideas about instruction or information emanating from in-service activities | 9 (1.0) | 30 (3.4) | 192 (22.0) | 340 (39.0) | 300 (34.4) |

Key: N = Never, S = Seldom, R = Rarely, F = Frequently, A = Always

Table 1 demonstrates that the highest score of responses for item 1 'informs teachers of opportunities for professional development' is 'F-Frequently' by 333 or 38.2% respondents. It is followed by 'R-Rarely' by 214 or 24.6% respondents, 'A-Always' by 194 or 22.3% respondents, 'S-Seldom' by 108 or 12.4% respondents, and 'N-Never' by 22 or 2.5% respondents.

Table 1 shows that the highest score of responses for item 2 'selects in-service activities that are consistent with the school's academic goals' is 'F-Frequently' by 336 or 38.6% respondents. The following scores are 'A-Always' by 287 or 33.0% respondents, 'R-Rarely' by 208 or 23.9% respondents, 'S-Seldom' by 32 or 3.7% respondents, and 'N-Never' by only 8 or 0.9% respondents.

As shown in Table 1, the highest score of responses for item 3 'supports teachers' requests for in-service training that is directly related to the school's academic goals' is 'F-Frequently' by 354 or 40.6% respondents. It is followed by 'A-Always' by 277 or 31.8% respondents, 'R-Rarely' by 174 or 20.0% respondents, 'S-Seldom' by 57 or 6.5% respondents, and 'N-Never' by only 9 or 1.0% respondents.

Table 1 indicates that the highest score of responses for item 4 'distributes journal articles to teachers on a regular basis' is 'F-Frequently' by 272 or 31.2% respondents. The following scores are 'R-Rarely' by 232 or 26.6% respondents, 'A-Always' by 145 or 16.6% respondents, 'S-

Seldom' by 181 or 20.8% respondents and finally, 'N-Never' by 41 or 4.7% respondents.

Table 1 shows that the highest score of responses for item 5 'actively supports the use of skills acquired during in-service training in the classroom' is 'F-Frequently' by 328 or 37.7% respondents. It is followed by 'A-Always' by 257 or 29.5% respondents, 'R-Rarely' by 225 or 25.8% respondents, 'S-Seldom' by 54 or 6.2% respondents, and 'N-Never' by only 7 or 0.8% respondents.

Table 1 demonstrates that the highest score of responses for item 6 'ensures that instructional aides receive appropriate training to help students meet instructional objectives' is 'R-Rarely' by 289 or 33.2% respondents. It is followed by 'F-Frequently' by 279 or 32.0% respondents, 'A-Always' by 190 or 21.8% respondents, 'S-Seldom' by 89 or 10.2% respondents, and 'N-Never' by 24 or 2.8% respondents.

Interestingly, as shown in Table 1, the highest score of responses for item 7 'arranges for outside speakers to make presentations on instruction at faculty meetings' is 'A-Always' by 294 or 33.8% respondents. It is followed by 'F-Frequently' by 282 or 32.4% respondents, 'R-Rarely' by 236 or 27.1% respondents, 'S-Seldom' by 52 or 6.0% respondents, and 'N-Never' by only 7 or 0.8% respondents.

Table 1 shows that the highest score of responses for item 8 'provides time to meet individually with teachers to discuss instructional issues' is 'F-Frequently' by 300 or 34.4% respondents. It is followed by 'R-Rarely' by 240 or 27.6% respondents, 'A-Always' by 203 or 23.3% respondents, 'S-Seldom' by 119 or 13.7% respondents, and 'N-Never' by only 9 or 1.0% respondents.

Table 1 demonstrates that the highest score of responses for item 9 'sits in on teachers' in-service activities concerned with instruction' is 'F-Frequently' by 358 or 41.1% respondents. The following scores are 'R-Rarely' by 232 or 26.6% respondents, 'A-Always' by 227 or 26.1% respondents, 'S-Seldom' by 42 or 4.8% respondents, and 'N-Never' by only 12 or 1.4% respondents.

Finally, Table 1 shows that the highest score of responses for item 10 ‘sets aside time at faculty meetings for teachers to share ideas about instruction or information emanating from in-service activities’ is ‘F-Frequently’ by 340 or 39.0% respondents. It is followed by ‘A-Always’ by 300 or 34.4% respondents, ‘R-Rarely’ by 192 or 22.0% respondents, ‘S-Seldom’ by 30 or 3.4% respondents, and ‘N-Never’ by only 9 or 1.0% respondents.

Table 2 describes in detail the mean, standard deviation, rank, and level of implementation of each task involved in the practice of promoting professional development among principals of cluster secondary schools of Malaysia according to the principals’ and teachers’ perceptions.

Table 2

Level of Implementation in Promoting Teachers’ Professional Development among Principals of Cluster Secondary Schools of Malaysia According to Principals’ and Teachers’ Perceptions (N = 871)

| No. | Items | Mean | Std. Dev. | Rank | Level of Implementation |
|-----|---|------|--------------|------|----------------------------|
| 1. | Informs teachers of opportunities for professional development | 3.65 | 1.036 | 8 | High |
| 2. | Selects in-service activities that are consistent with the school’s academic goals | 4.00 | .898 | 2 | Very High |
| 3. | Supports teachers’ requests for in-service training that is directly related to the school’s academic goals | 3.96 | .934 | 3 | High |
| 4. | Distributes journal articles to teachers on a regular basis | 3.34 | 1.122 | 10 | High |

| | | | | | |
|-------|---|-------|-------|---|-----------|
| 5. | Actively supports the use of skills acquired during in-service training in the classroom | 3.89 | .929 | 5 | High |
| 6. | Ensures that instructional aides receive appropriate training to help students meet instructional objectives | 3.60 | 1.023 | 9 | High |
| 7. | Arranges for outside speakers to make presentations about instruction at faculty meetings | 3.92 | .956 | 4 | High |
| 8. | Provides time to meet individually with teachers to discuss instructional issues | 3.65 | 1.014 | 7 | High |
| 9. | Sits in on teachers' in-service activities concerned with instruction | 3.86 | .908 | 6 | High |
| 10. | Sets aside time at faculty meetings for teachers to share ideas about instruction or information emanating from in-service activities | 4.02 | .892 | 1 | Very High |
| Total | | 3.788 | 0.971 | | High |

* *Implementation Key:*

Very Low = 1.00-1.99; Low 2.00–2.99; High = 3.00-3.99; Very High = 4.00- 5.00.

It is interesting to observe that according to Table 2, all items for promoting teachers' professional development among principals of cluster secondary schools of Malaysia according to the principals' and teachers' perceptions have a 'High' level of implementation and only one item enjoys a 'Very High' level of implementation.

Table 2 indicates that the highest score for promoting professional development of teachers among principals of cluster secondary schools of Malaysia according to the principals' and teachers' perceptions is given to statement 10, that is, 'sets aside time at faculty meetings for teachers to share ideas about instruction or information emanating from in-service activities'. It enjoys a 'Very High' level of implementation and ranks number one with mean = 4.02 and standard deviation = 0.892.

The second highest score is given to statement 2, that is, 'selects in-service activities that are consistent with the school's academic goals' with mean = 4.00 and standard deviation = 0.898 and it also enjoys a 'Very High' level of implementation. The third highest score is given to statement 3, that is, 'supports teachers' requests for in-service training that is directly related to the school's academic goals' with mean = 3.96 and standard deviation = 0.934 and it enjoys a 'High' level of implementation.

Consecutively, the fourth highest score is given to statement 7, that is, 'arranges for outside speakers to make presentations on instruction at faculty meetings.' The fifth highest score is given to statement 5, that is, 'actively supports the use of skills acquired during in-service training in the classroom.' The sixth highest score is given to statement 9, that is, 'sits in on teachers' in-service activities concerned with instruction' and finally, the seventh highest score is given to statement 8, that is, 'provides time to meet individually with teachers to discuss instructional issues'.

On the other hand, Table 2 determines that the third lowest score is given to statement 1, that is, 'informs teachers of opportunities for professional development.' It is followed by statement 6, that is, 'ensures that instructional aides receive appropriate training to help students meet instructional objectives'.

Finally, Table 2 indicates that the lowest score for promoting teachers' professional development among principals of cluster secondary schools of

Malaysia according to principals' and teachers' perceptions is given to the statement 4, that is, 'distributes journal articles to teachers on a regular basis'. The average mean in the level of implementation is 3.788 and standard deviation is 0.971.

6. Conclusion

The best practice for promoting teachers' professional development was "setting aside time at faculty meetings for teachers to share ideas about instruction or information emanating from in-service activities" and it was appreciated by 73% teachers. Other best practices were "selecting in-service activities that are consistent with the school's academic goals" and "supporting teachers' requests for in-service training that is directly related to the school's academic goals"; both affirmed by 71% teachers as occurring 'Frequently' or 'Always'.

Only 2 out of 10 practices were categorized with a 'Very High' level of implementation for promoting teachers' professional development and these were "setting aside time at faculty meetings for teachers to share ideas about instruction or information emanating from in-service activities" and "selecting in-service activities that are consistent with the school's academic goals." All others were categorized as 'High'. None was categorized as a low level practice.

School principals' communication with school teachers and their empowering the teachers to give their input will lead to successful implementation of professional development programs. It is also obvious that teachers prefer in-house trainings with specific goals to synchronize with schools' over all goals. Both teachers and principals made it clear that the goals and content of professional development must not be imposed from the outside; rather, it should be a home grown agenda developed through in-house consensus.

7. Discussion

The study indicated the best practices of developing teachers' professional development among principals of cluster secondary schools of Malaysia as identified by school teachers and principals. In this section, the researchers

will discuss the level and significance of 10 practices according to the charter given by the education ministry for charter schools.

A highly ranked practice of cluster school principals was “selecting in-service activities that are consistent with the school’s academic goals”. It is in accordance with the aspirations of Education Blueprint 2013-2025’, Malaysia. Through this practice, school leaders endeavor to provide the best possible education for every child, regardless of his / her geographical and socioeconomic background and gender.

The Education Blueprint 2012 declares that MOE aspires to halve the current urban rural, socioeconomic and gender achievement gaps by 2020 (Salleh, [2014](#); Salleh & Hatta, [2018](#)). It is the practice of cluster secondary schools in Malaysia to offer a place of study to students from various socioeconomic backgrounds as long as they perform academically in public examination conducted by MOE.

Another well-recognized practice of cluster school principals was “supporting teachers’ requests for in-service training that is directly related to the school’s academic goals.’ It is significant to realize that the Blueprint values ‘quality teachers’ and aspires for enhanced teacher coaching and support to improve the delivery of knowledge, skills, and values covering all academic and non-academic aspects of curriculum. It calls for hiring qualified human resource in cluster secondary schools to produce students who are able to compete nationally and internationally, especially regarding academic performance (O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw & Eklund, [2015](#); Fancera, [2019](#)).

It is stated in the Blueprint that MOE will also strengthen and empower state and district offices to improve the quality of frontline support provided to all schools. By the end of Wave 1 (2013-2015), MOE was expecting that all teachers, principals, and schools would have achieved a minimum standard of quality. The results affirmed that schools are indeed above the minimum quality criterion, although keeping in view the school improvement efforts made globally, there are miles to go. Moreover, the program of inviting authentic speakers attracted medium attention only and was not very well received. Though its purpose was to raise awareness and deliver appropriate information to teachers, yet proper attention was not

paid to the dissemination of such information. This practice was ranked the lowest.

A dominant practice of cluster school principals was “actively supporting the use of skills acquired during in-service training in the classroom”. This is in accordance with the statement in the Blueprint and its aim was the capacity building of teachers for bringing improvement in students’ literacy (in Bahasa, Malaysia and English) and numeracy through intensive remedial programs. The results showed that cluster school principals engaged a number of teachers in capacity building through in-service training and ongoing professional development. Although training is a particularly important mechanism for improving the quality of teachers (Hallinger, [2005](#); Hallinger, Adams, Harris, & Suzette, [2018](#)), yet the age limit for teachers to join certified training programs became a major barrier in this case. It is recommended that such age limits must be removed so that school principals are successful in attracting sufficiently qualified candidates and allowing every teacher to maintain and enhance their skills set, including staying up-to-date with the latest developments in pedagogy (Wang, Wang, Li, & Li, [2017](#); Salleh & Khalid, [2018](#); Rashdi & Khamis, [2018](#)).

Next in the hierarchy were two practices. The first was “being present in teachers’ in-service activities concerned with instruction” and the second was “providing time to meet individually with teachers to discuss instructional issues.” Both of these practices are significantly related to teachers’ competency in teaching skills; a common phenomenon of interest and an ongoing challenge for everyone. Unfortunately, these have not been a key priority of cluster school principals so far. It is stated here based on the results of this research that principals need to invest more time in observation and personal follow up of the programs.

It was confirmed by other sources used by MOE that cluster school principals “informed teachers of opportunities for professional development” and conducted professional development programs for teachers. According to the results of Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), participation in the professional development activities was very good. Over 90% of teachers’ reported that they spent approximately 10 days each year on professional development, which is

more than the ministry mandated requirement of seven days per year (Alathi & Pehlivan, [2014](#); Harris et al., [2017](#)).

Although the Blueprint 2012 emphasized that cluster school principals would ensure that instructional aides received appropriate training to help students meet the instructional objectives; however, this practice was ranked at the 9th level. It shows that cluster school principals paid more attention to the professional development of teachers as compared to teacher assistants. Since the provision of support for new teachers is mandatory, cluster school principals must provide opportunities to novice teachers and teaching assistants for co-teaching (Adams, Devadason, Periasamy, & Lee [2018](#); Harris, Jones, Adams, & Cheah, [2019](#)).

There are several reasons for student absenteeism and poor attendance, such as poor access, parental attitudes, and an unattractive school environment. Day et al. ([2016](#)) promulgated that student absenteeism has a broad range of root causes that are often context specific; not only the cluster school principals need to know these reasons but they also need to build effective strategies to develop interventions intended to address the specific needs of students in their schools. These strategies may include teachers visiting homes of the students, providing transportation, and enhancing physical attractiveness of the schools (Nair & Jaiun, [2015](#)).

However, cluster school principals need empowerment to take independent actions and resources to enact such decisions. The Blueprint 2012 promises that during Wave 3 (2021 to 2025), cluster school principals will be empowered for creating a peer-led culture of professional excellence. By 2021, all elements of the new ‘Principal Career Package’ are expected to be in place. MOE also expects that there will be high performing principals and supporting school leaders in every school, who will have the leadership skills to drive ongoing improvement and innovation.

The last statement on the ranking list was “distribution of journal articles to teachers on a regular basis”, which shows that this practice was not a top priority as well. Cluster school principals still find it hard to create a research culture. It should be a top agenda in Wave 2; teachers should be informed and updated about contemporary issues and challenges related to the national and international educational scenario and they must be guided

to include such agenda in their personal goals (Adams et al., [2018](#); Jarvis, [2018](#); Depolo, & Vignoli, [2019](#)). Cluster school principals need to acquire appropriate leadership skills to work effectively and lead others, especially in the increasingly interconnected world (Noman, Awang & Shaik, [2018](#)).

8. Implications

Malaysia aspires to be in the top three countries in terms of performance in international assessments as measured by outcomes in TIMSS and PISA within 15 years. Achieving this goal will require an enormous commitment by the entire nation. In the past decade, very few school systems have managed to make such a step change in performance (Alatlı & Pehlivan, [2014](#)). However, several of the world's top performing school systems, such as those of Singapore and South Korea, have demonstrated that it is possible for a system to go from poor to great performance within a few decades (Noman et al., [2018](#)). Therefore, additional assessments that address the relevant dimensions of quality in the Malaysian context should be included in the Blueprint.

MOE admits transforming the teaching profession into a profession of choice (Salleh, [2014](#); Adams et al., [2018](#)). It remains committed to its long standing policy of strengthening the teaching profession to make it a vibrant, rewarding, and prestigious profession in Malaysia. Drawing on the success of previous efforts and preliminary engagements with teachers and teacher unions, it proposes rolling out a new 'Teacher Career Package' in forthcoming waves. It will address challenges currently faced by teachers at each point in a teacher's career, from recruitment and teacher training to retirement. It encompasses raising entry standards, increasing the number of individualized and continuous professional development opportunities, enabling teacher progression by increasing competencies and performance and creating a peer-led culture of excellence (Fancera, [2019](#)).

MOE recognizes that teachers may need assistance in gaining the new competencies expected of them and it is deeply committed to providing teachers with the support they need to succeed. As such, it will build up its portfolio of training programs to address each aspect of the competency requirements in the new instrument. Some of these modules will cover fundamental competencies expected of all teachers, such as pedagogical

competence needed to support the development of higher order thinking among students and will therefore be made compulsory (Day et al., [2016](#); Buske, [2018](#); Harris et al., [2017](#)). Others will be elective and teachers may choose from depending on their personal strengths and interests or the areas for development identified via the new instrument. In developing this portfolio, MOE will focus more on school-based learning programs which international research shows to be the most effective form of professional development.

As declared in the Blueprint 2012, MOE should establish a performance management system that sets high expectations for individual teachers by establishing clear KPIs. This system will invest in capability building to help individual teachers achieve their targets (Salleh & Hatta, [2018](#); Harris et al., [2019](#)). Moreover, the performance management system must include reinforcement strategies; it should reward top performance and should address poor performance without creating a culture of blame. In the same goodwill of transparency, MOE should also publish performance results annually so that the public can track progress made on the Blueprint programs (Salleh & Aziz, [2012](#); Nair & Jain, [2015](#)).

The principals need to monitor teachers' instructional activities in the schools, solve problems and act promptly taking the right action (Velarde, [2017](#); Okorji, Igbokwe & Ezeugbor, [2016](#)). The Blueprint 2012 stated that there should be an ongoing dialogue between the stakeholders about performance and its possible consequences. Hence, collective decision-making is possible suggesting revisions and alternative actions to continue with its implementation.

Good schools tend to have increased the lesson observation requirements beyond the minimum threshold of twice a year (Wang et al., [2017](#)). Moreover, cluster school principals must assure the provision of extra support through shared teaching of classes with more experienced teachers, the creation of a timetabled slot each week for teachers to spend in lesson planning workshops, and the assigning of mentors from the pool of more experienced teachers to provide ongoing coaching and feedback (Salleh & Hatta, [2010](#); Salleh, [2014](#); Salleh & Khalid, [2018](#)).

MOE is at the starting point of its journey to develop an education system capable of producing Malaysians who will remain competitive in a globalized, 21st century world (Alatlı & Pehlivan, [2014](#)). This requires a reconsideration of what student learning means and a re-articulation of the kinds of skills that the Malaysian education system wants to inculcate in its students. In order to truly transform student learning, change needs to happen at all levels—the ministry, states, districts, schools, principals, and teachers (Javris, 2018).

It is hoped that this study provides useful findings which will effectively assist the process of promoting a positive school learning climate among principals and teachers of cluster secondary schools in Malaysia. Consequently, they will facilitate and improve students' academic performance, nationally and internationally, as stipulated in the National Philosophy of Education, Vision 2020 and the aspirations of the Malaysia Education Development Plan 2013-2025, in the era of IR 4.0.

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